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## WILLIAM WELLS NEWELL — 1839-1907

On January 21, 1907, at his home in Wayland, Massachusetts, after a very brief illness, William Wells Newell passed quietly and unexpectedly away. To science and to the circle of his friends and acquaintances the loss is great. The writer of this memorial notice, having known him and worked with him for more than fifteen years, mourns the disappearance of a lovable personality no less than the passing of one of the great figures in the history of anthropological science in America. All who knew him felt the uniqueness of his power to labor and at the same time to stimulate others. He was the happy combination of the *man* with the *man of science*, one who fulfilled the requirements of old Terence — “*Homo sum, et humani a me nil alienum puto.*” Fortunate was it that the foundations of the study of folk-lore as a science in America were laid under his auspices.

Mr Newell had a good ancestry and inherited qualities from both sides. He was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, January 24, 1839, his father being the Reverend William Newell, long the minister of the First Parish (Unitarian) Church in that city; and his mother, the daughter of Mr Wells, a schoolmaster of the good old type, a man of marked character and influence in his day. After graduating from Harvard in 1859, he studied for the ministry and took his degree from Harvard Divinity School four years later. When he left college, he acted for some months as assistant to the Reverend Edward Everett Hale, and might have spent the rest of his life in social service and allied philanthropic activities had not the exigencies of the country at the time demanded his presence elsewhere.

His pastoral labors began at Germantown, Pennsylvania, where he was beloved and is still affectionately remembered; but soon ended, for he did not find the ministry of such a nature as to make it his life-work. He next turned to the profession of teaching, conducting for some time a private school; from 1868 to 1870 he was Tutor in Philosophy at Harvard University. In 1884 he made his home in Cambridge, devoting himself to private study and research in literature and the new science of folk-lore, in the pursuit of which he rose to eminence. He was, for the rest of his life, a marked example of the scholar and investigator, who had no direct connection with any educational or scientific institution, public

or private. From time to time, however, he delivered before various societies and institutions addresses on subjects of various sorts in the fields of literature and folk-lore. Besides his connection with the American Folk-Lore Society, Mr Newell had relations with several other literary and scientific bodies. He was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and a member of the American Anthropological Association. He was also an active and valued member of the Authors' Club of Boston, in whose social functions and literary exercises he alike took part; and of the History of Religions Club, where his wide reading and great knowledge of comparative folk-lore and primitive religion made him indispensable to his fellow members. No discussion of such topics was ever complete without his illumining word.

Mr Newell was an accomplished Shakespearean scholar, as the present writer was pleasantly made aware during a performance of one of the great plays by Julia Marlowe one evening in Montreal after the meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society in that city in 1892. His knowledge of the text of the play was extensive and his critical remarks were all to the point. To the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* (vol. xv, 1902) he contributed an article on "The Sources of Shakespeare's *Tempest*," pointing out the folk-lore element in this and in Ayler's "*Die Schöne Sidea*."

Drawn early to the study of the legends of King Arthur and the stories of the Holy Grail, Mr Newell continued an investigator in that field to the day of his death. His translations from Chrestien de Troyes were published in 1897 under the title *King Arthur and the Table Round* (2 vols.), with valuable introduction, interpretative and critico-historical comments, and notes. In this work, of which a flattering review appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* (vol. LXXX, 1898), Mr Newell set forth the opinion, repeated and amplified in a series of articles on "The Legend of the Holy Grail," contributed to the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* (vols. x-xv), and published as a whole in 1902, that Chrestien of Troyes was the one most important factor in giving shape and body to the Arthurian legends and that the Celts had no prime share in the production of a legendary *fond*, the origin of which had hitherto been commonly and completely attributed to them. This view has not received the approval of European critics, though there is evidently much truth in Mr Newell's contentions.

Mr Newell had a decidedly poetical temperament, and had his development proceeded entirely along literary lines, he might have accomplished much of lasting value in the form of verse. As it was, he did

publish several volumes of poems. In 1881 appeared a translation of the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, and in 1895 *Words for Music*, a collection of 46 of his own poems, a second edition of which, more than doubled in bulk, was published in 1904. In 1900 appeared translations of *Sonnets and Madrigals of Michelangelo Buonarroti*. Mr Newell's "Decoration" poem, dated from New Rochelle, New York, 1878, is a noble piece of verse, deserving place in all anthologies of greetings to the patriotic dead. A beautiful requiem, too, he wrote, but it hardly applies to himself, for many friends now harbor his thoughts after he has gone :

"From northern earth how bloomed this stranger blest?  
Beloved and cherished upon Nature's breast.  
Shall dear companions sigh above his grave  
While forests murmur, and while grasses wave?  
Who harboreth his thoughts, now he is gone? —  
No second friend; they trusted him alone.  
Where gain of life, since he hath found repose? —  
May be a bluer sky, a redder rose."

His profound humanity is revealed in a little poem of "Greeting," belonging to the year 1893 :

"Beside the tides of Atlantic, that flow so clear and so cold,  
By the feet of the shining Sierras, by western Gate of Gold,  
Where the billowy seas of the prairie roll green under skies of light,  
In glens of the leafy highlands, on fields where the cotton is white;  
I hail thee, I greet thee, my brother! Receive the heart and the hand,  
In the name of the bountiful parent, the dearly beloved land!  
She weareth the mantle of plenty, she reigneth from sea to sea;  
As wide as the realm of the mother the thoughts of the children be."

Besides his literary and poetic gifts, Mr Newell had also a certain mechanical skill, and at his home in Wayland he established a private press from which came or were to come one or two of his minor publications. He was indeed a manysided man in the best sense, and this manysidedness repeated itself in the particular branch of science to which his life was chiefly devoted. In folk-lore he touched topic after topic, without losing sight of the general nexus.

In 1883 Mr Newell published *Games and Songs of American Children* (New York, pp. xii, 242), a work which in its second edition (1903) is still the standard and only comprehensive and authoritative treatment of the subject. Here the importance of such activities of the child in relation to the primitive beliefs and practices of the race is pointed out and their comparative aspect considered. This book has been the *vade mecum* of

all subsequent investigators in this attractive field. In his contributions to the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* Mr Newell several times touched upon the same topic. In the fifth volume (pp. 70-71) he discussed "Knights of Spain" as illustrating marriage by capture, and in the twelfth volume (pp. 292-293) treated of children's games and rhymes from Philadelphia, Brooklyn, etc. In a note (vol. VII, p. 96) on the "Diffusion of Song-games," he maintained that the identity of English and American games is due in part to "the continual admixture caused by immigration," and not alone to descent from common originals. It was in his book on games and songs that Mr Newell expressed the opinion, approved subsequently by Professor F. J. Child, that "the English ballad was already born when Canute the Dane coasted the shore of Britain; its golden age was already over when Dante summed up mediæval thought in the *Divina Commedia*; its reproductive period was at an end when Columbus enlarged the horizon of Europe to admit a New World; it was a memory of the past when the American colonies were founded." He held, too, as proved by Professor Child's investigations, that, with the possible exception of a few later historical ballads, there is "no such thing as a distinctively Scottish popular song," Scottish ballads being in general "only surviving dialectic forms of old English." The pages of the *Journal* reveal how successful he was in attempting to gather the still existing remains of English ballads in America. To the *Boas Anniversary Volume*, just issued, Mr Newell contributed a "Note on the Interpretation of European Song-Games," in which he emphasizes the importance of continued culture-contact as a factor in the production of concordance.

In 1888 Mr Newell was busy with the preliminaries for the foundation of a society for the study of folk-lore in America, in accordance with a circular letter issued May 5, 1887. At a meeting held in Cambridge, January 4, 1888, was organized the American Folk-Lore Society, which has reached its present proportions largely through his zealous labors and his unselfish services. Mr Newell was the first secretary of the Society, and the only occupant of that office, his tenure of which being afterward made permanent. The Society determined to issue a *Journal* of a scientific character, designed "for the collection of the fast-vanishing remains of Folk-lore in America," and "for the study of the general subject, and the publication of the results of special students in this department." The first number of the *Journal*, for April-June, 1888, appeared under the general editorship of Mr Newell, whose intimate connection with this publication ceased only with his death.

From the issuing of the first number in 1889 to the close of the thirteenth volume in 1900, Mr Newell, was the editor of *The Journal of American Folk-Lore*, and continued his services as associate editor from that time until his death. Of the Memoirs (eight volumes, 1894-1904; the ninth is soon to appear) published by the Society, he was also the responsible editor. A glance through the volumes of the Journal reveals the enormous amount of editorial and other work accomplished by him. Besides contributing some thirty important and many minor articles, he conducted several departments, and furnished many scores of authoritative book reviews, to say nothing of innumerable lesser bibliographical notes. These book reviews abundantly demonstrate his wide reading and thorough grasp of the subject of comparative folk-lore, no less than his wonderful knowledge of those topics lying more especially in his own particular field. It is in some of these reviews that we find examples of his best work, both as to criticism and as to literary form; here he was often most genial. As an editor he was ever courteous and sympathetic, with an abiding sense of humor. When the late lamented Gatschet, in days before the Carnegie-Roosevelt-Matthews era, insisted on spelling "rhyme" *rime*, Mr Newell yielded to his desires, but appended to the article (vol. II, p. 53) the following note:

"*Rhyme, rime.* The latter spelling of this word, as etymologically the true form (see the etymological dictionaries), is preferred by our *collaborateur*, as by several modern writers. The case seems to be one in which liberty of choice may reasonably be demanded."

In an article of his own, appearing in the last number of the sixteenth volume of the Journal, a misprint had escaped attention till the final proof, and in correcting it he wrote:

"Of course. What a thing is the human mind! 'Tis not aphasia,— but heterology, or whatever the word is for meaning one thing and perceiving another. Pray correct to *Patagonians*."

The writer, whose association, unofficial and official, with Mr Newell in the conduct of the Journal covers almost the period of its existence, will always esteem it one of the most pleasurable and satisfactory labors of his life—something impossible to repeat or to duplicate. The stimulus of his sympathy will continue to the end.

When the Journal began, Mr Newell, who had been for some time much interested in "voodooism," contributed to the first number an article on "Myths of Voodoo Worship and Child Sacrifice in Hayti," in which he discussed exaggerated statements as to "Voodoo" practices

and pointed out the etymology of the term "voodoo" (and, with it, also "hoodoo"), from French *vaudois*, first "Waldensian," then "witch," by reason of the practices attributed to the Waldenses by their Catholic neighbors and enemies. To this subject he recurred several times (vol. II, pp. 41-48; IV, pp. 181-182). Other aspects of Negro folk-lore received his attention, and he expressed the opinion (vol. XII, pp. 294-295) that "the farther proceeds the collection of Negro superstition in America, the more clearly it appears that a great part of their beliefs and tales are borrowed from the whites." In the Memoirs of the Society are included H. Chatelain's *Folk-Tales of Angola* (1894) and Prof. C. L. Edwards' *Bahama Songs and Stories* (1895), showing the catholicity of his interest.

Another subject in which his original investigations bore fruit was "The English Folk-tale in America." His first note on this topic was published in the first volume of the Journal, while his most important treatment of it is to be found in the valuable comparative study of "Lady Featherflight," read before the International Folk-Lore Congress at London in 1891, and published in its Papers and Transactions (pp. 40-64). Beginning with a brief discussion of "Beauty and the Beast" (vol. II, pp. 213-218), he gave the Journal a series of valuable and often exhaustive comparative studies of folk-tales, songs, superstitions, etc. Such were "Game of the Child-stealing Witch" (vol. III), "The Carol of the Twelve Numbers" (vol. IV), "Conjuring Rats" (vol. V), "Cinderella" (vol. VII and XIX), "The Ignis Fatuus" (vol. XVII), "The Passover Song of the Kid" (vol. XVIII), etc. In these original and critical studies he gave expression to some very interesting, sometimes absolutely convincing, conclusions. "Cinderella," for example, he regarded as a comparatively modern *märchen*, of European origin. Again and again he demonstrated the literary sources of certain items of folk-lore and indicated how "the ideas and literary productions of ancient civilizations are continually blending themselves with folk-lore" — a Jewish Passover song turns out to be a translation of a French *randonnée*; American Negroes possess the relics of a European heroic saga, etc.

The collection of the traditions, etc., of the native races of America was greatly stimulated by Mr Newell, who in an article on "The Necessity of Collecting the Traditions of the Native Races," contributed to the first volume of the Journal, maintained that "to complete the record of the mythology of American Indians is to the full as important as to make researches in Greece, Assyria, or Egypt," while the need of collection is more imperative owing to the rapid disappearance of much of

the material. Time and again he laid the investigators of the mythology and folk-lore of the American Indians under obligation by emphasizing the importance of the lore of primitive races (vol. III, pp. 23-32, p. 160, etc.), insisting always that, as expressed in the earliest statements of the objects of the American Folk-Lore Society, its program should include "the entirety of the oral traditions of the Indian tribes of America." The phrasing of the original circular was, "Lore of the Indian tribes of North America (myths, tales, etc.)." His influence in promoting research in this field was very great. Three of the volumes of *Memoirs* published by the Society relate to the Indians (Navaho, Thompson River, Pawnee). In the second volume of the *Journal* appeared an article on "Current Superstitions," written in collaboration with Mrs Fanny D. Bergen, whose two volumes on *Current Superstitions* and *Animal and Plant Lore* were subsequently published as *Memoirs*. The subject of superstitions, weather-lore proverbs and phrases, dialect and colloquial words, etc., was touched upon by Mr Newell from time to time (vol. II, pp. 153, 203; vol. V, p. 60, etc.); he even suggested etymologies for "gas" (vol. II, p. 64) in the slang sense; for the Louisianian "calinda" (vol. IV, p. 70), etc.

The encouragement which he gave to the investigation of the interesting folk-lore of the people of French descent in North America resulted in the publication of Professor Fortier's *Louisiana Folk-Tales* as the second volume of the *Memoirs* of the Society (1895). A brief note in the seventh volume of the *Journal* (p. 60) evidences both his delight at the discovery of a quaint oath of the French Canadian *voyageurs* and his skill in finding its analogues in the wider field. As the pages of the *Journal* also show, he stimulated research into the folk-lore of the Germans in Canada, and especially promoted the study of the "Pennsylvania Germans," with their rich material of all kinds. At his suggestion the number of the *Journal* for April-June, 1904, was devoted to a reprint, with introduction by Carleton F. Brown, of J. G. Hohman's *The Long Hidden Friend*, for a century a prime authority of Pennsylvania witch-doctors and a valuable book of popular magic.

Nor did he neglect the folk-lore of Spanish America, as the contributions of Gatschet, and particularly of Bourke, demonstrate; while the forthcoming ninth volume of the *Memoirs* is to consist of M. R. Cole's *Los Pastores, a Mexican Miracle Play*, in which are made accessible for the first time the Spanish texts from Texas and New Mexico.

To the number of the *Journal* in press at the time of his death he contributed a valuable comparative "Note" on Philippine variants of Cinderella; and at the eighteenth annual meeting of the Society at New



York (December 27, 1906 to January 1, 1907) he treated the subject of "Philippine Märchen." Thus he showed his interest in the latest addition to the field of "American" folk-lore.

Although the best statements of Mr Newell's views on many more or less theoretical questions of comparative folk-lore are to be found in discussions, which, unfortunately, seldom found their way into print, reviews of books, etc., the rest of his writings contain several articles of theoretical criticism and exposition of the results of his own careful study and investigation. Some of these appeared outside the pages of the Journal.

Before the International Anthropological Congress, held at Chicago in 1893 in connection with the Columbian Exposition, Mr Newell read a paper on "Ritual Regarded as the Dramatization of Myth," in which he sustained the thesis that legend is the basis not only of ritual speech and song, but also of ritual costume and even gesture. Myth and ritual, indeed, are two correlated elements of worship equally ancient and equally important. In an article on the "Theories of Diffusion of Folk-tales" (vol. VII, pp. 7-18), after discussing the various theories on the subject he gives expression to his own view that "in almost all cases folk-thought and folk-practices are imposed by cultured races on the more barbarous, and very little passes from the savage to the civilized." The history of ideas, he held, is not parallel to that of speech. In 1902 he contributed to *The International Monthly* an article on "Fairy Lore and Primitive Religion," of which the chief conclusions are the fundamental identity of spirits of every sort — many are the survivals of ancient divine powers — fays, for example, correspond to the innumerable Roman genii; and the practical character of the ends of early religion. He showed how "fairy mythology, apparently light and fantastic, nevertheless represents the serious belief and worship of early religious life." The question of individual and collective characteristics in folk-lore he discussed in an article in the Journal for 1906, in which he argues that "the alleged collective or 'communal' character of folk-song, its simplicity and universality, are sufficiently explained by its oral medium, and by the relatively simple life of antiquity as compared with the more differentiated present."

The funeral of Mr Newell took place from the Unitarian Church in Wayland on January 27, and was attended by a number of his scientific colleagues and friends. On March 10 a memorial service was held in the First Parish (Unitarian) Church in Cambridge. The minister of the Church, Rev. S. M. Crothers, presided, and addresses on Mr Newell and his work were delivered by Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson for the Authors' Club of Boston; Dr Franz Boas of Columbia University for the

American Anthropological Association, and Professor C. H. Toy of Harvard University for the History of Religions Club. Letters were read from Reverend Edward Everett Hale, and from Professor F. W. Putnam who, being unable to be present on account of the state of his health, wrote on behalf of the American Folk-Lore Society, his communication being read by Dr R. B. Dixon, president of the Society. Dr Crothers closed the meeting with a few sympathetic words and the reading of one of Mr Newell's briefer poems. The meeting was a simple and effective tribute to the man whose lovable personality drew round it so many men of many minds.

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From the beginning until his death (the last one was scarcely completed when he departed) Mr Newell furnished to the Journal the Reports of the Annual Meetings of the Society; also notes of local meetings, branch societies, etc.

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